on Sound and Context

Davíð Brynjar Franzson,

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Introduction

This text is not intended as a general theory, nor a compositonal method, even less for applied analysis, and least of all as a listening guide. At best it frames a problem and does not try to solve it.

Simplicity / Clarity

Simplicity is not the same as clarity. With clarity comes the illusion of simplicity, but with simplicity alone, comes the same confusion as with any other way of thinking that lacks clarity.

Simplicity does not affirm clarity just as complexity does not negate it.

When we speak of clarity in music, we use the word to refer to two different meanings: the clarity of thought, and the clarity of execution.

The clarity of thought or concept is the clarity of the idea itself.

The clarity of execution is how clearly the idea is expressed in the surface of the music.

One is a clarity of thought, the other a clarity of action.

the Clarity of Thought

The clarity of thought does not mean that an idea can be reduced to a simple statement or put into words. It is the shadow of meaning, the gestalt, the idea, the feeling, the sound of the piece, etc.

Such an idea can be as simple or complex as possible, as long as it is so clearly formed that all judgements of what is right and what is wrong can be reflected off of it.

When clarity of thought is achieved, all compositional decisions become reflected against the clarified idea. What may seem like intuition is simply a composer's judgement reflected against a clear line of thought.

the Clarity of Execution

The clarity of execution is the clarity with which the idea of a piece is expressed in the actual heard surface of the music. This means the clarity with which decisions, materials, sounds and actions embed the fundamental idea in the fabric of what is heard.

In a sense, the clarity of the execution of an idea is contiguous with the efficiency of the execution of the idea.

Clarity of execution is then achieved through the use of materials that express, reflect on, can be measured against, or stand in some sort of a relation to the idea of the piece. In fact, the clarity of execution should be embedded within the clarity of thought. Material and idea should be one and the same.

It is therefor wrong to speak of materials in purely musical terms. Materials should be spoken of in terms of how (efficiently) they express an idea.

the Confusion of Simplicity and Clarity

Clarity of thought does not guarantee the clarity of execution, but the clarity of execution is hard to achieve without clarity of thought.

A piece that is clear in thought and confused in execution will sound complicated and confused.

A piece that is confused in thought but clear in execution will sound naive.

A piece that is both clear in thought and execution will sound simple no matter how complex the idea is, but a piece that is unclear in either thought or execution will sound confused no matter how simple or effective the thought or the execution.

Structural Program

A piece contains a number of often conflicting a priori programs, some absolute, some social, e.g. the physical program of the physical medium (what are the instruments or what is the medium), the social program of the physical medium (what type of a group, what sort of a setting), etc.

A piece is assembled on top a topography of such programs, from typologies of sounds and contexts.

Its surface is the seemingly meaningful typography of sounds and contexts constructed on top of a topology formed by the interaction of the topography of programs and the typologies of sounds and the contexts that they appear in.

Modes of Listening

For a piece to be successfully heard, it must state its mode of listening, or at least state a mode of listening, i.e. a mode that allows the listener to engage with the piece.

A mode of listening can be anything—ranging from how and what we hear as units within a piece, wether it is pitch, sounds, contexts or symbolically associated content.

This is most often a non-issue for composers as most music does this through reference—stylistic, direct or oblique—to already established modes of listening.

This referential model breaks down in cases where a) music takes a step beyond referentiality and into uncharted territories, or b) when a new type of music emerges.

Such music then, needs to explicitly state its mode of listening, that is, in some way communicate to the listener what the listener should be listening to. That does not mean that there can't be more than one level of listening, simply that for each of those levels, the clarity of definition should be locally maximized.

This can be done through e.g. persistency of material and structure or through an exposition of the space within which compositional decisions are being made.

Sound / Context / Form / Content

Sound / Context

A sound can be heard as the sound itself or as a part of something else—a part of a whole.

The rare few times we hear a sound alone, we hear it as a free standing entity, a complex of all the features of the sound interacting with each other to form that one particular sound.

When we hear a sound as a part of something else, we no longer hear it as a whole. Instead we hear those features of the sound that seem meaningful in the context that we hear the sound in.

When a sound is heard as a part of whole—as more than just the sound itself—then something is acting to contextualize the sound.

The context that we hear a sound in affects how we hear the sound. Anything can act to contextualize a sound as long as it's definition is made clear within a piece.

The continuous re-contextualization of a sound activates the sound when heard out-of-context or when heard before a new context is established. Its potential to go somewhere, to go anywhere becomes heard. Its latent potential becomes electrified.

Form / Content

Form is produced by associating certain sounds with certain contexts at certain times.

The form is then not produced through the linear interaction of materials, but through the interaction between sound and context, i.e. which sounds are associated with which context at what time.

The absolute order and position of sound / context instances becomes irrelevant, all differences between form and content evaporate. Form and content become one.

Subtle shifts in the interaction of sounds and contexts can then cause drastic changes in the perceived form of a piece.

Since the form of such a piece is not produced by the absolute order of sounds / context instances, but through shifts in the interaction between the two, the global form or shape of the piece can retain its effectiveness through fairly drastic re-ordering of the local level.

We can frame this as a question: What is the minimum organization needed for a listener to feel that something has happened, that something has been heard, in a piece.

This is the structural program.

on Sound

Divisibility of Sound

Sound is infinitely divisible, but the resulting entity of such division is in-and-of-itself still always a sound.

As such, sound is the smallest possible musical unit.

There are always finer-grained parametrical distinctions to be made between any two sounds, but such distinctions between sounds only become important if those two sounds are assigned different functions within the same context or through their interaction in two contrasting contexts.

Thus, sound can become un-divisible in a specific context.

What a specific sound is, is then defined by the role that the sound plays in the context it appears in, or by its role in all contexts that it could appear in.

A sound can only have a fixed identity when heard in context.

Relations between Sounds

Not all relationships between sounds are parametric.

For two sounds to be heard as relating, they have to share some invariant feature, be it parametric characteristics within the sounds themselves, their socio-cultural nature, their novelty in a situation, or their role within a context.

Even though such identity may not be latent within the sound itself, it still means that there is a heard relationship between two sounds heard as relating. Musical sounds do not carry content in-and-of themselves.

Only in the interaction and comparison with other sounds do the sounds acquire meaning.

the Extensibility of Sound

After a sound has been heard in-context, you can no longer hear the sound-as-sound, instead, you hear it as a residue of the context it was heard in. It is not until a sound has been heard in a new context that it is liberated from the shadow of its original context.

Then, how is the sound heard after being heard in a second context? Is it heard as malleable, or as a sound that we now "know" that has the potential to appear in contexts other than the one that we have already experienced it in? Or is it now heard as a residue of the second context, erasing all traces of the first?

This is where a sound is activated, the latent potential of becoming is operationalized.

The sound, even when heard alone, is no longer heard as a closed sign. It is heard as a free-radical, capable of interfacing with anything at any time.

This is the extensibility of sound.

Sound in Context

What context a sound is placed in matters less than that the sound is placed in a context.

What a context is matters less than that its orthogonality to other contexts.

A context does not have to be explicitly defined in all dimensions. It only needs to be defined orthogonally on any one ore more dimensions in relation to the other contexts that appear within a piece

For all contexts to have full parity, this explicit definition must be done in as many dimensions as required for the context to be successfully differentiated from any other context when contrasted with one another.

There is nothing that says that such parity is desirable.

Also, there is nothing saying that contexts have to be globally defined. They could be defined locally, continuosly springing up throughout a piece. There is nothing saying that a piece must contain more than one context. A piece could consist of a single constant, its own identity function, performing the act of stating itself.

the Definition of Contexts

The more dimensions are used to differentiate the contexts appearing in a piece, and the more different this differentiation is between pairs of contexts, the richer the network of semantic shortcuts between them becomes and the more open the surface of the piece becomes.

This differentiation does not have to operate in the same dimension for all such comparisons between a specific context and all other contexts. The dimensions in which context A differs from context B can

be a completely different set of dimension than those the differentiate context A from context C. This leaves the contexts open for continuous re-interpretation in the local context.

Even when purposely working with the confusion between contexts, this still holds, as then, that little which differs between any two contexts is precisely that which makes the two contexts orthogonal to one another.

If contexts are purely locally defined, the definition of a context only needs to be orthogonal to those contexts, or those instances of contexts, that it interacts with in the locality in which it appears.

the Scope of Contexts

Then, how a context is defined matters less than that it simply is defined.

A context can be defined by features of any scope, wether it operates on a sound-to-sound level, on the relationship between sounds, or on the heard composite of sounds.

As the contexts only need to be orthogonal pairwise, the scope of any two contexts does not have to be the same. It is enough that some feature or features of the two differentiate them. One could be defined solely on parametric terms—e.g. low, rumbly and perforated sounds together—while another could be defined by the operation that the intersection of the sounds going into it performs—e.g. two as different sounds as possible becoming one. There is nothing to say that such difference in the scope of contexts is in anyway less clear or effective as defining all the contexts on the same level.

Secondary Characteristics

A sound outside of a context consists of an infinite number of characteristics.

When placed in context, certain of these characteristics become meaningful within the specific context. Other characteristics slip into the background. They become the hue of the sound, the seemingly inactive residue of that which is locally without meaning.

Thus, secondary characteristics are defined by the context that a sound appears in.

Semantic Shortcuts

These secondary characteristics can become interfaces that allow for alternative connections to be made between the sound / context instance and any other sound or sound/context instance.

Taken together, these secondary characteristics provide a densely connected web of semantic shortcuts between both sounds and sound / contexts instances.

Similarly, secondary characteristics of contexts, i.e. those characteristics that do not serve to provide a context with an identity in a given situation, become an interface that allows for connections to be made between different context and sound/context instances.

These are semantic shortcuts.

These semantic shortcuts take advantage of those dimensions that have been folded into the background in the definition of the piece.

Secondary Characteristics as Local Clarifiers

Secondary characteristics can also be used to further differentiate between contexts on the local level. If a certain characteristic of a sound is not acting towards producing meaning in the given context, those characteristics can then be used to increase (or decrease) the dissimilarity of contexts at the given point in time, e.g. associating a certain context with a certain pitch while associating a second context with a different pitch.

This effectively increases how orthogonal any two contexts seem when heard in contrast with one-another.

This can naturally also be done on the global level.

the Extensibility of Context

What then of the interaction between contexts? Are the rules that govern the relationship between contexts different than this that govern the relationships between sounds, and between sounds and contexts?

Contexts can interface with other contexts through semantic shortcuts. Contexts can also be nested within other contexts, allowing for a varying depth between the sound and the surface.

If we think of the relationship between sound and context as that of a variable and a function, then we can abstract the relationship and apply it on any other level of relationships as well, even that of context and context.

Imagine a sound / context instance, where the sound s is being contextualized through the context C.

C(s)

Now imagine placing that sound / context instance in a different context D, so that the instance is being contextualized within the second context. We then have:

D(C(s))

where D(x) is a context of the same order as C(x).

This is the extensibility of context.

So when I speak of sound I speak of whatever the unit being contextualized is, wether that is a simple sound (if such a thing exists) or a complex of sounds and their interactions.

Modulation of Perception

For a sound to be freed from the shadow of a context in which it has appeared, the perception of the sound must somehow be shifted.

This is a modulation of perception.

The re-contexutalization of a sound in is an example of a modulation of perception.

These sort of modulations can be either local or global, only affecting the units themselves or affecting the global scheme of sounds, contexts and their interaction.

A modulation is achieved in an infinite number of ways, affecting any or all levels of a piece—through an insert, an extra-musical breech, through shifting the attention from one level of scale to another, or through a complete re-association of sounds and contexts—as long as it shifts our mode of perception enough that a thing heard before—wether it be a sound, an instance of a context, or even the surface of the piece—would be heard completely differently if it would have appeared after this modulation.

This is a modulatory event.

A perfect modulatory event would be strong enough that the piece could go on precisely as it was going on before the event, but everything would be heard as if somehow new. This rarely happens.

Usually, this effect is strong enough to shift our perception far enough that we now hear how what has been happening can no longer keep happening the same way. Something acts to destabilize our sense of how things should be, disconnecting the relationships already established. Something else has to happen to stabilize the surface and convince us that something really has changed.

In fact, there doesn't even need to be an actual event as such, just a shift.

Such modulations do not have to occur within a piece, the whole of the piece can be such an event, in the same way that a piece does not have to consist of more than a single context stating its own identity.

What matters is that through some shift in the interaction of sounds and contexts the listener feels that something has happened, that something has changed.

In the end, it is not important for the listener to know what has changed, just that he feels as if something has changed.